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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the history of women in education in America. The primary force that allowed women into the nations' colleges was economic rather than ideological, when the Civil War took many men out of college. Women have been increasingly involved in higher education since then; however, they have been subject to job discrimination, and have been placed predominantly in low-status positions in academia and elsewhere. Frequently there are admission quotas of higher admission standards for women than for men, and discriminatory practices apply in financial assistance. Sexism is defended by physiological, psychological, intellectual and cultural arguments. The conclusion drawn is that the hand that rocks the cradle has sufficient cause and strength to rock the boat. (KS)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEXISM IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

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If we define sexism as a belief that sex is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that sexual differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular sex,* it takes little more than a little observation of everyday activities in academe to recognize that sexism is a major component of American education. It is not unique to American EDUCATION, nor is it unique to America, but it is an attribute of American education that should be critically scrutinized.

For two hundred years after the founding of Harvard in 1636, it was not possible for a woman to attend college in this country. It was not until then that Oberlin became the first college in the nation to admit women. In 1855 Elmira Female College was founded, and in rapid succession after the Civil War, the others who were later to become known as the "seven sisters" were born. It was not until 1884 that the first state-supported college for women in the world was chartered. It is now known as Mississippi State College for Women. These new

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*The definition of "racism" in Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary was used substituting "sex" for "race."

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colleges were generally small and their impact was insignificant in comparison with the existing all-male schools. Surprisingly, the major force that provided admission of women to the institutions of higher learning in this country was the Civil War.

Since a significant portion of the country's young manpower was involved in the War, and the country had been experiencing economic depressions, college enrollment was shrinking. To avoid financial collapse, the colleges turned to women to fill the empty chairs and general fund.

The primary force that allowed women in the nation's colleges, then, was not ideological, but economic. With the exception of the addition of a few powder rooms and some new rules of conduct, the colleges made few changes that would take into consideration the needs of women.

After the Civil War, the number of women that were accepted into previously all-male institutions was inversely related to the economic strength of the college. Established colleges in the East that had heavy endowments retained their exclusively male student body. The colleges in the West and denomination colleges, both of whose endowments were small, and the state universities exhibited less resistance to women as students. Between 1870 and 1890, the number of colleges that admitted women almost doubled, and the number of female college graduates increased fivefold. By 1900, graduate and professional schools for the most part were open to highly motivated women. After 1920 the number of women college graduates shot

up and continued to rise to 40 percent of the graduating classes today. During the sixties, the number of women who earned doctorates more than doubled, but this still only represents 12 percent of all doctorates.

Opening the doors of academe to some women was only a first small step for womenkind. Women get better grades in high school than men, but fewer of them enter college. Women do better in college than men, but fewer go on to graduate school. And those women who go on to achieve advanced degrees, face discrimination in employment. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the university itself, where women faculty members earn less than their male peers and must wait longer for promotion--up to ten years longer in the social sciences (National Academy of Science, 1968).

While almost 68 percent of the elementary and secondary school teachers are women, only 22 percent of the elementary school principals and only four percent of the secondary school principals are women. Further, of the more than 13,000 school superintendents, only two are women.

A 1966 survey conducted by the National Education Association found that in a nationwide study of degree-granting institutions, women represented 18 percent of the full-time faculty. Women comprise 33 percent of the instructors; 19 percent of the assistant professors; 15 percent of the associate professors; and only eight percent of the full professors. Things look even worse with the realization that women comprise less than ten percent of the total faculty in the

prestigious private institutions and large state universities, while at small four-year and two-year colleges, women comprise up to 40 percent of the faculty.

Bernice Sandler (1970) of the Association of American Colleges describes the problem in our colleges and universities today as "a massive, consistent and vicious pattern of sex discrimination." This pattern is accomplished by (1) admission quotas in undergraduate and graduate schools; (2) higher admission standards for women than for men; (3) and discrimination in financial assistance for graduate study.

The sexism in our society has been explained (defended) primarily by the use of four kinds of arguments: physiological, psychological, intellectual, and cultural. (I choose not to get involved in the biblical arguments.)

The first three arguments can be stated roughly as follows:

1. Women are physiologically different, and therefore not "designed" to perform the jobs that require advanced education.

2. Women are psychologically different, and therefore not prepared to cope with the problems associated with high-status jobs.

3. Women are intellectually different, and therefore do not have the kind of mind that is required for highly specialized jobs that require higher education.

I will dismiss these by quoting Cless (1963) and by citing a few statistics.

The quote:

> Higher education in the United States was designed exclusively for the white, upper- or middle-class male. Its procedures, its rigid uninterruped timetable, and its cost all but prohibits its use by women.

The statistics: about seven percent of this nation's physicians are women; 3.5 percent of our lawyers are women; and about one percent of our dentists, engineers and surgeons are women. By contrast, women in France, Britain, Germany and Israel and the Soviet Union are respectively 13, 16, 20, 24 and 75 percent of the phys-cians in their country. Seventy percent of the dentists in Denmark are women; 24 percent of the lawyers in Sweden are women; and 35 percent of the engineeers in the Soviet Union are women.

Linton (1963) summarized for us:

> All societies prescribe different attitudes and activities to men and to women. Most of them try to rationalize these prescriptions in terms of the physiological differences between the sexes or their different roles in reproduction. While such factors may have served as a starting point for the development of a division, the actual ascriptions are almost entirely determined by culture.

We are then, left with the cultural arguments, and therein is the nub of sexism. Our American society has sex-role stereotypes that are well-defined and slavishly accepted by both men and women. Our children learn the rules early: their parents take pains to color-code the baby's accouterments and environment; they buy the appropriate playthings that are reassuringly grouped by retailers as "toys for boys" and "toys for girls"; they modify youghful behavior with "Little boys don't do that," and "That's being a good little girl."

Boys that show an interest in playing doctor are encouraged to go to medical school and a savings account is immediately begun for that purpose; girls with the same interest are supplied with nurses uniforms. Should a boy ever entertain even the humanitarian aspects of nursing, dad immediately buys him boxing gloves and gives up his Sunday to stimulate the "proper hormones" in the lad.

By the time the child enters school (s)he has been exposed to, for five or six years, a totally consistent set of beliefs, attitudes and behavior patterns independently from parents, relatives, television (both programming and commercials), books and stories, church, and from every contact with a human that has been trained in our society. The school has only to reinforce the stereotypes, which it does with force and rigor. But the school is an educational institution and elementary school teachers (who in number are overwhelmingly female) have as a crucial component of their curriculum to prepare their pupils for their "roles" in society. At the time of birth of a boy, particularly if he's white and middle-class, it's almost impossible to predict what he will be doing twenty-five years later--the options are so numerous and exciting; but a girl--statistically you could be quite successful in predicting what her role will be a quarter of a century after her birth. So the school emphasizes mechanical and academic skills for boys, and "home skills" for girls. Many liberal Americans who insist that a black skin should not uniquely qualify its owner for janitorial and domestic service,

continue to assume that the possession of a uterus uniquely qualifies its owner for precisely that (Bem and Bem, 1970).

In a review of the intellectual differences between boys and girls, Maccoby (1966) has shown that no difference exists until high school. In high school, girls begin to do worse than boys on a few intellectual tasks, and beyond the high school years, the productivity and accomplishment of women falls considerably short when compared to that of men. It takes them a while to conform to societal expectations, but after eight to twelve years of formal education, women usually cooperate.

Lucy Komisar (1970) adds:

> At the center of the feminist critique is the recognition that women have been forced to accept an inferior role in society, and that we have come to believe in our own inferiority. Women are taught to be passive, dependent, submissive, not to pursue careers but to be taken care of and protected. Even those who seek outside work lack confidence and self-esteem. Most of us are forced into menial and unsatisfying jobs. More than three-quarters of us are clerks, sales personnel, or factory and service workers, and a fifth of the women with B.A. degrees are secretaries.

Most women work in low-paid occupations and earn less than men in the same occupation. Four out of five professional women are in just seven fields: teaching, nursing, music, social work, accounting, auditing, and library work (Alpenfels, 1962). Both men and women share an ideology that is antagonistic toward the idea of women in high status jobs (Keniston and Keniston, 1954).

In total we have a typical minority group stereotype, whose members are victims of what is for the most part a non-conscious ideology. Unlike other minority groups in this

country they are a majority in number (51.3 percent) and on paper they control almost 70 percent of the nation's wealth. Growing numbers of these women are becoming aware of the sexist ideology in this country, and clearly, the hand that rocks the cradle has sufficient cause and strength to rock the boat; but I'm confident that we've taught them to believe that "That's not what good little girls do."

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